

## The Twins: Virginia and Jane, 1917

Joseph T. Pearson, Jr., 1876 – 1951

Oil on canvas

60 x72 inches

James A. Michener Art Museum

Gift of Oliver Pearson



In *The Twins: Virginia and Jane*, which was awarded the Beck Gold Medal for portraiture from the 1917 Pennsylvania Academy Annual Exhibition as well as the gold medal at the 1926 Sesquicentennial International Exposition in Philadelphia, Joseph Pearson subtly delineates the expressive movements of his daughters in order to isolate features peculiar to each. Describing the Pearson portrait as an obvious choice for the Beck medal, a New York Times critic underscored the subjects' subtly differentiated gestures and poses: ". . . their likeness to one another subtly diverted . . . until you find yourself intently reading their future in [their] digressions from the family norm. . . . Not even the folds of the short skirts disobey the key of character struck in the one instance by the easy gesture and pliant bearing and in the other by the widely separated feet and the aggressive pose of the head on a sturdy neck. "

### Key Vocabulary

Portrait

Restoration

Symmetry and balance

Background

Twins

Photography

Pennsylvania Sesquicentennial Exposition of 1926

### Themes

*The Twins: Virginia and Jane*, addresses a variety of themes for discussion and lesson planning.

These include:

- Personality
- Contrast
- Foreground
- Background
- Focal point
- Portraiture
- Families in art
- Children in art
- Nature
- Asian influences

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## Looking Questions

- What do you see in this artwork? Describe all the details you can find.
- What can you find in the foreground, middle ground and background of this painting?
- What could the blue in the background represent? Explain your answer.
- Describe the shadows you see in this painting.
- How many birds can you count in this painting? What are they doing? What do you see that makes you say that?
- There are tree branches in this painting! Where are they coming from? What is resting on them? Explain your answer.
- Name everything you consider unusual in this painting.
- Some people may say this painting is balanced, or symmetrical. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- What do you find appealing about this work of art? What do you find unappealing? Why?
- Who do you think these girls are? How old do you think they are?
- Do you think the artist knew these girls in the painting? Why or why not?
- How do you think the girls feel? Why do you say that?
- If the twins could talk, what might they say?
- How does this painting make you feel? Why?
- Why do you think Virginia and Jane is known as Pearson's most successful work of art?
- Why do you think the Michener Art Museum has this painting in its collection?

## About the Artwork

*The Twins: Virginia and Jane* is recognized as Joseph T. Pearson's greatest work. It was a critical success when it was first exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts annual exhibition in 1917 where it received the Beck medal for outstanding portraiture. The painting then received the Potter-Palmer Award at the Chicago Art Institute Annual in 1918. This painting was also exhibited and won a gold medal at the 1926 Pennsylvania Sesquicentennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the same year that featured Daniel Garber's *A Wooded Watershed*, also in the Michener's permanent collection.

In this painting, Pearson's twin daughters were painted in their home in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Pearson planned the composition of this painting very carefully, with its stark blue background, pale pink dresses, and orange fabric hanging from beneath the sewing table in the center of the canvas. The twin girls are placed in a formal setting. Their pose indicates they wanted to please their father, but also shows their discomfort. The Japanese elements in this painting include the arrangement of the components of the painting, the simple composition, the solid blue background, the birds, the cherry blossoms, the stylized branches, the black table and the statue of the elephant. These elements are clearly in sharp contrast to the clearly American appearance of the two girls in their pink dresses, white tights, and black shoes.

Pearson signed the painting in the lower left with the letter “P”. The painting was donated to the Michener Art Museum by Pearson’s nephew, Oliver.

Compare *The Twins* with Pearson’s *Study in Gray*. It was painted twelve years before. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

## Compare and Contrast

### Elementary

- Artists through the ages have created images of children. Look at Pierre August Renoir’s *Madame Charpentier and her Children* ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)), Winslow Homer’s *Snap the Whip* ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)), and Diego Velazquez *Las Meninas* ([www.museodelprado.es](http://www.museodelprado.es)) and compare them to *The Twins*. In addition, compare these images with the children portrayed in some of your favorite stories, including Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, Allen Say’s *Emma’s Rug*, and William Steig’s *Brave Irene*.

### Middle School

- Compare the work of Joseph Pearson with the work of Julian Alden Weir and/or Diego Velasquez. Both artists who had had a profound influence on him and his work. Select a work by either of these artists to compare with *The Twins*, and write a critical analysis of the works. Compare and contrast subject matter, composition, color, value, and light.

### High School

- Diane Arbus (1923-1971) was one of the most influential American photographers of the twentieth century. Her *Identical Twins, Roselle New Jersey, 1967*, mirrors some of the qualities visible in Joseph Pearson’s *The Twins*. Compare and contrast these two works of art in an essay, including references to other renowned images of twins as well.

## Related Art Projects

### Elementary

- *The Twins: Virginia and Jane*, is a symmetrical painting. That means it is balanced, or has similar objects and forms on both sides. Create an original portrait using an art material of your choice that demonstrates the art element of symmetry or balance.

### Middle School

- Do the twins in this work of art look identical? Many viewers see them as two very different children. Create a self-portrait in the art medium of your choice, depicting your self as twins. What can you do to both of the faces or figures in the work of art to show that the “twins” have different personalities? Perhaps your “twins” show different sides of your personality.

### High School

- Study the portrait styles and techniques of significant Pennsylvania painters including Ben Solowey, Mavis Smith, and American Impressionists William Merritt Chase and Julian Alden

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Weir. Compare the techniques, styles and themes of these artists' works with *The Twins*. Using what you learn, create an original portrait that demonstrates the influence of one of these artists.

## Related Art History Projects

### Elementary

- Create a visual timeline about portraits that have been created throughout history. Choose at least ten different portraits from different parts of the world and different time periods. How do the images of people change with varying time periods and cultures?

### Middle School

- Pearson was an artist at a time when modern art styles were becoming popular, and so his work was largely ignored. In addition, Pearson did not create a huge body of work in his lifetime (in comparison, Van Gogh created over 900 paintings and 1100 drawings in ten years, and Picasso is in the Guinness Book of World Records for making over 147,800 works of art in his lifetime). Research works of art that were popular when *The Twins* was painted. How does their style and subject matter compare with Pearson's work? Create a visual display showing the comparisons you find.
- Many American and European artists have incorporated Asian elements in their work, just as Pearson does in *The Twins*. Some artists include James McNeill Whistler, Mary Cassatt, and Claude Monet. Learn more about them at [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

### High School

- In the 1920's and 1930's, there was a Depression in America. Many people were out of work, and most people did not have extra money with which to buy art. Collecting American art became unfashionable, and many institutions sold their American works to purchase art made by famous Europeans. Today, the art world is also an active part of the business world. Research current events about the art market in magazines, newspapers, and online, and create a visual display that tracks your findings. Add graphs and charts to show the financial aspect of the sales. How do current statistics compare with those from the Depression Era?

## Interdisciplinary Connections

### Language Arts

#### Elementary

- If you were going to make a painting of a person, who do you think you could best capture a likeness of a storybook character? A sports hero? A stranger? A friend? A family member? Yourself? Write a biography or fictional story about the real or fictional person you would paint, and add illustrations that help the character come to life. Describe the setting in which you would paint this person. How could you use visual elements in your painting to reveal the personality of your subject?

### **Middle School**

- Research famous twins in literature and mythology. Read at least one of their stories, and present your findings to your class. What is unique about the twins you learned about in these fictional works? How does their unusual role as twins impact the outcome of the story?

### **High School**

- Pearson was a versatile artist skilled in the craft of still life, landscape painting and portraiture. Like his contemporary associate, Daniel Garber, Pearson's strongest portraiture work is of his family. He executed early portraits of his wife and mother, and accomplished later portraits of his daughters. Writers create portraits as well. You can read some of them in classics such as Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Charles Dickens' Little Dorrit and J.D.Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. Read a few classic portrait novels or plays for inspiration, and then write a short story of your own that depicts a real or fictional character. As an alternative, write a short story that depicts one or both of the twins shown in Pearson's work as your characters.

### **Social Studies**

#### **Elementary**

- Twins are everywhere! Study the population of your school by doing a census about twins. How many twins attend your school? How many are male, and how many are female? How many students and teachers have twins in their families? Display your findings on a chart or graph. Share them with your school on the morning announcements, or through a display in the school lobby.

#### **Middle School**

- The cultural exchange between the East and West has been a two-way passage for many years. Starting with the first bolts of silk brought back to the west from China in ancient times, there have always been goods and culture from the Orient that have been accepted into Western society. This exchange can be strongly seen in the art world and through the work of artists like Daniel Garber, the American and French Impressionists, and in *The Twins*. Document this cultural exchange through a creative visual display, and incorporate technology if possible.

#### **High School**

- When Joseph Pearson died in 1951, the family decided to keep his studio in tact in his memory. He did not write about his paintings, so all we know about his ideas and symbolism is either through stories told by family members or informed guesses we make as art historians. This type of history is called oral history. Create an oral history about a neighbor, friend or family member. Record your findings on tape. Transcribe them into a written document. Share your findings with your class in an oral presentation.

### **Science**

#### **Elementary**

- In the blue background of this painting you will notice several birds. They appear to be robins because of their brown feathers, golden beak and reddish-orange breasts. There are many

different species of birds living in Pennsylvania. Create a two or three-dimensional visual display that teaches your classmates about the birds in Pennsylvania. You may also want to create a similar project about birds in another part of the world.

### **Middle School**

- Pearson felt that beauty could be found anywhere, even in the most common objects. In *The Twins*, identify the details from nature that Pearson has included to add beauty to the work of art. Then, collect objects of nature from outside, and identify their species using a science reference book created by the National Audubon Society. Create a three dimensional display or power point presentation that highlights your collection and the corresponding scientific names.

### **High School**

- Roy Wood was moved to contact the Pearson family when he first learned about the work of Joseph Pearson. Pearson's granddaughter answered his correspondence, and invited him to Pearson's studio in a converted barn. It had been literally untouched since his death in 1951. Wood found scenes of ducks in flight, portraits of children and family, religious works, still-lives and landscapes, all in desperate need of conservation. He initiated the restoration of the collection to its original splendor. There are many paintings in art museums that are found in strange places and brought to museums for the world to enjoy. For another wonderful art rescue story, look at Daniel Garber's *A Wooded Watershed* at [www.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org). How does science play a role in this art rescue story?

### **About this Artist**

Joseph Thurman Pearson Jr. was born on February 6, 1876 in a small house next to his great-grandfather's property in Germantown, Pennsylvania where he was one of ten children. Pearson went to elementary school and then a manual training school to learn his father's trade. But Joseph was not interested in the work of a box manufacturer, so his father arranged for him to work with an architect and sculptor in Philadelphia. The architect, Wilson Eyre, recognized Pearson's talent and recommended that he pursue the study of art. Pearson later won a scholarship and attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts from 1896-1901, and there had the opportunity to study with the American Impressionist painters, William Merritt Chase and Julian Alden Weir. Weir's influence on Pearson was profound. In 1901, Pearson also traveled to Germany, Italy and Spain to study from more classical painters, such as the works of great artist Diego Velázquez.

While traveling in Europe, Pearson corresponded with Emily Ruoff Fetter. They were married on October 7, 1902. He had a large family. His wife took care of their seven children and was his business manager. Others drove the family car, as Pearson was so preoccupied with the landscape that they feared he would drive off the road. None of his children became artists.

Pearson loved painting landscapes. He did not paint his landscapes en plein air as did most of his peers. Instead, he worked in the studio, laboring over paint colors and surfaces on a grand scale. He is known for his fondness for portraying animals in the wild, birds in flight, hunting

and equestrian pursuits. He also worked in still life and portraiture. He made many religious paintings as well. In all of his paintings, Pearson experimented with thick impasto, scumbling and layered daubs of almost iridescent pigment.

Pearson was a teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for over 25 years. He was known as a wonderful teacher with many talents. It is because of his work as a teacher that we can attribute Pearson with training many students and influencing the development of the arts in America. He preferred more traditional painting, so when the Academy leaned toward Modern Art in the 1930's, he quit teaching in 1937 and returned to his home in Huntington Valley with his family. There he enjoyed rural life. His beloved wife Emily died suddenly in 1947, and soon after Pearson remarried painter Alice Kent Stoddard, whom he had known from the Pennsylvania Academy. She was a dear friend of the Pearson family and easily settled into life at "Pearsons' Corner." Pearson died on February 23, 1951 and a retrospective of his work was held at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1952.

### **Bibliography and Web Resources**

The following resources were collected in October 2009.

Peterson, Brian (Ed). *Pennsylvania Impressionism*. Philadelphia: James A. Michener Art Museum and University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

*An Evolving Legacy: Twenty Years of Collecting at the James A. Michener Art Museum*. Exhibition Catalogue, James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, 2009.

*Joseph T. Pearson, Jr. A Painter in the Grand Manner*. Exhibition Catalogue. Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, 2001.

Schantz, Michael. "Joseph Thurman Pearson", Jr. *American Art Review*, Vol XIII, No. 3, 2001.

To understand more about Asian art and Asian influences on American culture, visit the website of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC at [www.asia.si.edu](http://www.asia.si.edu).

Read all about twins in mythology in the classic D'Aulaires' *Book of Greek Myths*, Doubleday and Co., 1962.

Learn more about American photographer Diane Arbus at [www.diane-arbus-photography.com](http://www.diane-arbus-photography.com) (Note: images may be considered graphic for some student viewers).

The world of art is at your fingertips at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

To view portraits in the collection of the James A. Michener Art Museum, visit their website [www.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org). In the Bucks County Database, look for Thomas Hicks, Nelson Shanks, Roy Nuse, Paul Keene, and Mavis Smith, among others.

The Prado in Madrid, Spain, houses some of the world's greatest portrait masterpieces [www.museodelprado.es](http://www.museodelprado.es).

For an in depth view of portraits from around the world, visit the website of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC at [www.npg.si.edu](http://www.npg.si.edu).

To learn more about the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where Joseph Pearson studied, visit their website at [www.pafa.org](http://www.pafa.org).

To learn more about Pearson's work, visit Learn with the Michener Art Museum, at [www.learn.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.learn.michenerartmuseum.org).

### **Credits**

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